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ABSTRACT

This paper examines several perspectives and their implications for school social work services to prevent and deal with school failure and dropping out. It examines the different reform efforts and factors involved with dropping out of school. Much of this discussion is shaped by the personal, general school social work experiences and knowledge gained by a school social worker while serving on a statewide steering committee that examined school dropout behavior in Kentucky. School social workers, whether explicitly stated in their job descriptions or not, have always been involved in dropout prevention. A broader ecological definition of dropout behavior is proposed and a helpful perspective, the interactionist model, is detailed. School social workers and other concerned school personnel must address the total problem of the student being at risk of failing in life. Some specific social work strategies and services to deal with school failure are outlined within this interactionist framework. Includes a selected bibliography and addresses of relevant web sites. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/MKA)

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# School Reform and School Failure: Lessons from Kentucky

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(Presented at the 1998 Annual Conference of the Kentucky Association for School Social Work, Louisville, Kentucky, September 24-25)

**Abstract**

This paper examines several perspectives regarding school reform and their implications for school social work services to prevent and deal with school failure and dropping out. I will examine the different reform efforts and factors involved with dropping out of school. Much of this discussion is shaped by my general school social work experiences and the knowledge gained while serving on a statewide steering committee that examined school dropout behavior in Kentucky. School social workers, whether explicitly stated in their job descriptions or not, have always been involved in dropout prevention. A broader ecological definition of dropout behavior is proposed and a helpful perspective, the interactionist model, is detailed. As school social workers and other concerned school personnel, we must address the total problem of the student being at risk of failing in life. Some specific social work strategies and services to deal with school failure are outlined within this interactionist framework.

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Recently I served on the Commissioner's Steering Committee on Dropout Prevention. Two social workers served on this committee including a Family Resource Director and myself. Other members included a State Board of Education member, Kentucky Department of Education officials, teachers (current and retired), school superintendents, a guidance counselor, a school psychologist, a Director of Pupil Personnel, a field supervisor for the Juvenile Court System, a state social services representative, a professor of education, and two business leaders. This steering committee was formed as a result of a recommendation of an initial study that examined the dropout problem in Kentucky. A concern was that despite Kentucky's educational reform efforts that the dropout rate was rising, not declining as expected (Kentucky Department of Education, 1997).

## Research shows that:

- The students that are least prepared economically and educationally are most likely to dropout (Orr, 1987).
- In one study seventh grade students who eventually dropped out had high levels of aggressiveness and low levels of academic performance.
- Another study indicated that students who eventually dropped out were more likely to have school attendance and discipline problems than students who continued in school.

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- Students that dropout and students that eventually graduate can be differentiated as early as the third grade and are significantly different in behavior, grades, retentions, and achievement scores (Woods, 1995).

- Family variables greatly influence educational success and dropout behavior:

✓ Low SES characterize chronic truants and poor achievers.
✓ Parents of low achievers have less education.
✓ Parents of low achievers value education less.
✓ Parents of low achievers demand less of their children.
✓ Parents of low achievers are less involved in their child's school.
✓ There is less communication and less positive discipline between low-achieving students and their parents (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 1996; Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990).
✓ SES and parental educational levels and attitudes so strongly influence dropout behavior that these factors statistically negate all other factors including race and ethnicity (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Rumberger et al., 1990).

Many perspectives were voiced by these various professionals and leaders in the dropout prevention committee including holding the individual schools and school systems more accountable, holding individual teachers more accountable, holding parents more accountable (particularly regarding truancy), and providing more individual assistance to the students including alternate and more flexible class scheduling and charter schools.

Most at-risk reform perspectives either blame the student (including the student's family) or the school environment (including teachers) for the student's failure in school. The "blaming the student" perspective emanates from a deficit model. The "blaming the school" perspective is found in the constructivist model. To be fair, the constructivist model mainly deals with in-school structural variables, which are not the variables that generally concern school social work. Many constructivist proponents believe that these structural variables are the only variables that can be influenced by school personnel (Crawford, 1997).

An alternative perspective is the interactionist model (Allen-Meares et al., 1996), a model that attempts to incorporate the strengths of the divergent models to deal with school failure and dropping out. I will provide brief descriptions and a comparison of the three models in just a few moments.

## ❑ A Broader Definition and Comparison of the Perspectives-

Much is discussed about how dropouts fare so poorly in society both economically and socially, however dropping out is another symptom rather than a cause of these negative future consequences. Most adolescents who drop out are already severely disadvantaged. A broader definition is required, one that takes into account the specific circumstances and interactions of the student in his or her environment. Students that are at risk of failing in school are also at risk of failing in life. At-risk status is cumulative and is also on a continuum. Problems can range from discouragement because of poor performance in a class to skipping classes, skipping

school, delinquency, drug and alcohol addiction, depression, and suicide. One study involving over 22,000 students found that 25 to 35 per cent of these students were seriously at risk (Frymier and Gansneder, 1989). How do the different intervention perspectives deal with and explain the at-risk status of students?

**Deficit Perspective:**

This model provides a solid perspective based on a great deal of research as to why students do or do not regularly attend school in the first place. Students that remain in school have incentives at home, express a feeling of involvement with the school's purposes, and possess the necessary social skills to attach and bond to their parents, teachers, and peers. These attributes contribute to a commitment to learning and a belief in future possibilities. Students that eventually drop out of school generally have not experienced this attachment and bonding process (Leone, 1990). However, the deficit intervention model often unfairly labels students by placing the entire responsibility on personal and family background variables. Often this leads to schools giving up and lamenting there is nothing than can be done. Little attention is given to how the schools might be more proactive in their approaches to serve at-risk students.

**Constructivist Perspective:**

The constructivist intervention model is more interactionist in its approach than the deficit perspective, but the major focus is placed on the schools' responsibilities and accountability. Little attention is paid to student factors such as personal, family, or socioeconomic circumstances that the constructivists believe are beyond the school's authority and interest. The strength of this approach includes a push for schools to be more cognizant of the school environment and teacher-student interaction that may contribute to student failure and alienation. Conversely, this approach ignores the voluminous body of research that shows that many students arrive at school already alienated and disadvantaged in many ways due to societal, environment, behavioral, and family circumstances. Contrary to what many constructivist proponents believe, schools do not create students' at-risk status. Schools are not generally the original source of the student's problems. Unfortunately, too many schools and school systems contribute to the problems, but as pointed out earlier, dropping out of school is but one symptom of an array of problems that are present with a large percentage of our youth. Studies have indicated that after students have dropped out of school that they have continued to have problems in the workplace and community (Orr, 1987; Woods, 1995).

**Interactionist Perspective:**

I propose an interactionist intervention model that recognizes the underlying personal and family variables that contribute to success or nonsuccess in school in addition to a recognizing the school's responsibility to help students. What is needed is a better fit between what students can or are willing to do and the demands of the school organization and curriculum (Allen-Meares et al., 1996). In this ecological perspective (see Garbarino, 1992) all parties, including students, parents, teachers, and community leaders are asked to participate in the change process. Anything and anybody become resources for intervention and change. If a student's behavior needs to be addressed it can be in this model. Or attention can be directed at a student's peer

group or assistance can be given to the family. Community involvement and relevant agencies can also be used as resources. Reciprocity and the interdependencies of relationships are the focus instead of the blame game. Figure 1 gives a comparison of the three approaches as to accountability, focus of attention, focus of change, and resources made available for change.

## School Social Workers Beware:

The constructivist model is enticing to progressive school staff, including school social workers. It does not stigmatize, it seems egalitarian, and it eliminates a need to address factors that schools seemingly have no control over. The model also seems more "revolutionary" (and thus it has to be better) than traditional approaches. Many of the constructivist remedies and ideas are well founded and well intentioned, but the overall model is deceptive. We can become so "enlightened" that we hold no one accountable, including the student. Complete adherence to this model may lead a school social worker to miss something in the social context that could be addressed. Some constructivist proponents undermine their argument by stating that personal needs of the students should be addressed. Also a complete adherence to the constructivist model eliminates the need for support services, as the more strict adherents believe school restructuring alone solves many of the at-risk problems of students.

## What can schools do? What does the research show?

- "Effective schools" research (Allen-Meares et al., 1996; Rossi & Stringfield, 1995) indicates that some schools can be more successful than others with at-risk students because of how the schools are managed and organized:

✓ Effective schools have high expectations as to behavior and academics.
✓ Services are "personalized" and directed to the individualized needs of the students.
✓ Effective schools have strong administrative leadership and a sense of teamwork among staff.

- However, many effective schools still face problems with attendance and student alienation. Perfect schools and perfect teachers cannot address or negate all of the factors involved in producing at-risk status for youths because we do not yet have perfect heredity, perfect parents, or a perfect society.

- Educators confess to a lack of skill with or confidence in many of the approaches to working with at-risk students.

## Several Guiding Principles and Recommendations Apply:

- The earlier the services and interventions the better. Early intervention is more effective and cheaper in the long run.

Figure 1

## Comparison of Three Intervention Models for At-Risk Students

| | Deficit | Constructivist | Interactionist |
|---|---|---|---|
| Accountability | Student and family | School staff | All responsible parties including student, peer group, family, school staff, and community |
| Focus of attention | Intra- and interpersonal and family dynamics | School structure and organization | The match or "fit" between what the student can or is willing to do and the demands of the school/curriculum |
| Focus of change | Changing the student and/or family | Changing staff interactions and staff-student interactions and the structure within the school primarily; some attention is given to personal attributes of student and/or surrounding community | Achieving a better fit between the student's cooperation/capabilities and what the school is offering and/or demanding; attention is given to any needed changes with student, peer group, family, school structure and organization, and/or the community |
| Resources available for change | Student and/or family | School staff | Student, peer group, family, school staff, and/or community |

- Services should personalized and geared toward the individual needs of the student and of the school.

- Create a management team within each school that ensures that each student is reading at grade level by the fourth grade.

- Services should take into account the interactions between the student, his or her family, the school, and the community. Services are needed to address the individual and family problems of the students. Services are needed to help the school staff and parents become more effective in addressing the needs of at-risk students.

- Provide programs that address issues of violence prevention- provide services for improving problem solving skills, conflict resolution, and social skills development.

- With any program or service, adequate follow-up is essential.

## Conclusion

Organizing services to at-risk students around the deficit perspective would ignore the school's legitimate role and responsibility in helping the students. Complete adherence to the constructivist model minimizes the responsibilities of the student, family and community to prevent school problems and dropout behavior. Constructivist proponents fail to recognize that the student's attitudes and behaviors are part of the relationship process in schools. Students that drop out are at-risk of having further problems that go beyond academic concerns. I suggest an ecological approach or an interactionist perspective that focuses on the relational and reciprocal nature of the dropout problem. The scope of the change process and appreciation of available resources can then more adequately address the at-risk status of so many of our youth.

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**Web Resources**

Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR). http://scov.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/general.html

Education Policy Analysis Archives, http://olam.ed.asu.edu/epaa

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), http://www.nces.ed.gov

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NREL), http://www.nwrel.org

Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), http://www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/